

Hi, my name is Rick Langtot and this is My Life, Wildlife. I work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, Alaska in the migratory bird management division. I am the Alaska shorebird coordinator. I've been in that position since 2002. Well, I'm from the Midwest, upper Minnesota, only about 90 miles from the Canadian border, right on the edge of the Red River Valley. Very cool place to see prairie chickens and white tailed deer and a whole variety of species. And yeah, I was really into archery and whitetail deer hunting. So I spent a lot of time in the woods, especially during my high school years. My high school biology teacher was also one of the best teachers that we had, and really inspired me to do well in that field. I was also doing construction at the time, I'd taken several classes at the high school and done well in the carpentry. So I had these two trajectories going one was to either go into carpentry slash cabinet making, or one was to go into biology. But in the end, my best friend in high school convinced me to go to the University of North Dakota, because he was going into physics. So I decided to do the biology route. Ironically, after a year, he dropped out of the university and went into carpentry. I've been going into biology ever since. I wouldn't change anything at all. I've had amazing opportunities throughout my career to do a lot of cool things. I really enjoy being by myself in the wilderness, just literally by myself. just soaking it in, and feeling isolation feeling the raw portion of nature, and the Minnesota Woods wasn't anything like that, in a sense, you can still hear in the background, the garbage trucks backing up, you know, in the horns, beeping and things like that. But since coming to Alaska, I really have enjoyed the wilderness. It's just amazing. It's just, it's a different world. You know, we're not most people aren't used to it, and are probably uncomfortable with it. But I just get inspired and feel energized when I'm in wilderness situations. I first came up here in 1987. That was when I was hired as a refuge technician at the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. The fieldwork back then was really, well, it was more adventurous than it is now. We never had cell phones or even satellite phones at that point in time. They had what we call single sideband radios. it's basically a long pole that you stuck up in the air and it had these long wires coming off and you would connect it to this big device that had a big battery attached to it. You would try to talk back home and frequently it wouldn't work, or you would maybe you could reach somebody in the Aleutian Islands, and they could relay the call to somebody back to Anchorage. Half the time it didn't work. So you're just more isolated. It wasn't like the protocol now is that you call in every night. If you don't call in the next day, they're going to send a helicopter looking for you. Back then they just expected you not to be heard every night. It was just the way it was. It put more risk obviously into it but also more adventure. Though things have changed tremendously in that regard.

My first two summers were amazing. I carried my camera everywhere. I had a big camera and I just took as many pictures as I could. Now unfortunately, after being up here for 30 years, I guess almost exactly. I don't carry my camera. I have my phone of course, but I have to see it and be renewed through all the volunteers and technicians that work with me. I see it through their eyes and see their astonishment. I think I've had probably over 100 now that I've worked in my camp in Utqiagvik or Barrow is the name that it used to be, which is northern Alaska. It's a small village, about 5,000-5,500 people. We've had a long term study going there for about 19 years studying the breeding and ecology of shorebirds.

Getting into birds really happen by chance. I'm very passionate about it. I really, I love shorebirds, and I've really sunk my teeth into that particular group of birds. I think partly I did that because that was my

first volunteer experience working on them and just learning how amazing they can be and how unique they are. Sandpipers, plovers, oystercatchers, avocets, turnstones. Those are the more common ones. There's, I think 217 species throughout the world. In Alaska, we have about 73 that visit Alaska at some point or another. 37 species that breed here regularly. I think there's about nine of those species or populations of those species that breed only in Alaska and nowhere else in the world. Generally, they're small, very docile birds relative to some of the other species. I've been lucky to study shorebirds on the breeding grounds, where they separate into their territories and isolate from one another to some extent. And they get also very colorful and very vocal, which they're using during their courtship displays, and trying to attract mates trying to defend their territories from other birds. They have these amazing migrations, a lot of the shorebirds breed in the High Arctic, a good majority of them do, and then they'll migrate down all the flyways than migratory flyways, down into southern South America or Central America or East Asia, down to Australia and New Zealand. That's the best part and also, the most difficult part about studying shorebirds is that to conserve shorebirds, you have to conserve them throughout their flyways throughout their whole annual cycle. That's difficult to do when you may have a bird crossing over 20 different geopolitical boundaries, with different regulations along the whole way. Some places a lot of conservation being done in other places, no conservation being done. So the trick is define where the birds are being limited, and then try to affect conservation in those areas the best you can.

Right now, we have large international collaborations with people throughout Russia, Canada, and Alaska, all studying the breeding ecology of shorebirds. We're all using standardized methods so that we can combine our data together and look for patterns through space and time in how adults survival is changing for species or how nest survival is changing through time. Same thing along the migration routes, we can connect with people throughout the whole flyway, it's been very useful at trying to understand how climate change is affecting bird density, bird, nest initiation dates, brood survival, all these various breeding factors that are being affected by climate change. Mostly because in the Arctic, things are changing much more rapidly than anywhere else. They say it's at least twice as fast as other places, things are getting warmer summers are getting earlier, summers are longer than it used to be. So we're trying to understand, is that good or bad for the birds? Just in the last four years, we had the two warmest years on record, and the two coldest years on record. Over those 20 years in the last four have been like that, so that much more variable weathers is making it more difficult for birds to know what to do. That may be good, though, because at least in some years, they might do fine. In other years, they're not going to do okay. So the jury's still out how things are going to ultimately end up but a lot of the modeling is projecting that a lot of the species that I work on are going to end up

not being able to breed there any longer and going north. The problem is there isn't much north left to go to. They're going to end up going to Greenland or to northern Canada and there's already species in those places. The situation's are different there. So whether they could adapt to those northern conditions. We don't know that either. So I'm hoping that what we've done in Barrow is a good landmark study. It's the longest running study in Alaska for breeding shorebirds, and it's a good timestamp of what things are like at the beginning of the 21st century, I guess. I wish I could live long enough to see what it was going to be like at the beginning of the 22nd century, that time I'm sure it's going to be different.

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This has been my life wildlife, a production of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs, producers Lisa Hupp and Kris Pacheco produced in story edited by David Hoffman for citizen racecar audio editing, sound design, and original music by Garrett Tiedemann. Artwork by Michelle Lawson. In Alaska, the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service are shared stewards of world renowned natural resources, and our nation's last true wild places. The lands and waters of this place we call home, nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. Our hope is that each generation has the opportunity to live with, live from, discover, and enjoy the wildness of this awe inspiring land and the people who love and depend on it.